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ABSTRACT

Dropping out of school is an event in a long series of life stresses. This paper gives the results of an in-depth ethnographic study of 11 at-risk females at a high school in the greater New York metropolitan area. The primary themes that emerged from the students were centered around their desire to have adults communicate with them in a non-hurtful way. When the students were asked who they turn to when having a problem and why they turn to the person, they identified remarkably few people. The security guards, one guidance counselor, and a few others emerged as trusted confidants. Students also identified adults who exhibited non-caring behaviors. An examination of responses showed that teachers who were attentive, respectful, helpful, and who listened, were perceived to be caring and concerned about students' social and academic welfare. It has been shown that successful secondary schools give students a sense of belonging, a sense of school membership, and foster academic engagement. A number of recommendations are given to help guide school officials in building and sustaining a caring school community, as well as in developing a program that promotes self-esteem and produces a culture of caring for all students. (RJM)

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ED 402 523

Out of the Mouths of Babes...Voices of the At-Risk Students

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Professional educators have had much to say about at-risk adolescents (Wehlage, Newmann, Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, Mann). Public figures such as John Bradshaw, T. Berry Brazelton, Fred Rogers, and others attempt to educate us in the dynamics of family systems theory, addiction, and children who rear themselves when parents fail them. Parallel to this has been a long-standing national concern about the group identified as at-risk. The high school students of today are the leaders of the 21st century. The newspaper headlines, television, and radio are filled with stories of loss of hope, crime, disease, poverty and a lack of heroes.

Dropping out is an event in a long series of life stresses. In the past, dropout theory has linked student's background with dropping out. Over time the concept of dropping out has evolved into the concept of at-risk. This concept of at-risk focuses on the potential for dropping out. All students are at risk, but for some students, at some point, the risk becomes too high. There are active negative forces in the schools themselves, identified as impediments, that are causing students to drop out. Impediments include: the lack of intrinsic rewards, obsession with covering curriculum, technical

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definitions of knowledge, mechanical perceptions of success, and a lack of veriety in teaching styles.

The voice that has been missing from the dialogue is that of the adolescents. An in-depth ethnographic study of 11 at-risk females was recently conducted in a middle class neighborhood high school in New York State. All eleven female students participated in focus group interviews. There were six students in one group and five the other group. Of those students, three were Latino, two were Caucasian, and six were African-American. In one group, there were three African-American, one white, and two Latino students. The other group had membership made up of three African-Americans, one white and one Latino. Two of the students were in an Alternative Education program; the rest were students in the regular program.

The primary themes that emerged from the students were centered around their desire to have adults communicate with them in a non-hurtful way, and the request to be talked with instead of talked at or told. The intended outcome of the study was to develop recommendations that would guide school officials in building and sustaining a caring school community, as well as develop a program that promotes self-esteem and produces a culture of caring for all students.

Who Are the Persons Perceived as Caring by At-Risk Students?

When the 11 students were asked who they turn to when having a problem and why they turn to this person, they identified remarkably few people. This was also true of the students' response to who keeps them in school. The security guards, one guidance

counselor, a female in the community who once had been at-risk and since has "made it", a best friend and finally, a few professional staff members were perceived as the students' primary caregivers.

Engaging the at-risk students must be a collaborative effort, according to Goodman (1995):

> For all the reams of research and the endless social jargon, the current troubled state of children in America can be summed up pretty much in one sentence. There aren't enough caring adults in their lives. Most of the adults that children now see live inside of a television set. (p.79)

The students' responses agreed with the above statement. When probed, some students identified peers and cousins primarily because they listened and could relate:

> * My cousin. My cousin can relate to it. She listens and gives good advice, even if I don't like to hear it
>
> * Friends, no adults, I can't talk to my parents, they don't listen, their way that's it. They throw things back in my face. Friends give good advice. Friends understand more--like about a guy, they are going through the same thing.

The security guards are often the first person to whom the at-risk students turn:

> * Last week I was so upset, Alvin, the security guard, took me to Claire (a female security guard). My best friend, she is in the hospital for depression (third time). I can talk to Claire, and she can relate. She has good advice.

A few students perceived one counselor, one administrator, and a few teachers to be the persons they turn to when they have a problem:

> * Mr. Manilow (counselor), I'm cool with him. Dr. Angelou (assistant principal), she tells me education is important, she helps me out. She wants me to write a book about my life and having babies.

The counselor had been instrumental in acquiring baby clothes for the above student, giving her a car seat, and enrolling her in a parenting program. He has also begun

researching colleges that have accommodations for teen parents so that the student can consider college as an option.

The reader will note that in the following instance a caring behavior on the part of an administrator was interpreted by the students as non-caring. The student was sexually abused by various family members. The administrator and counselor, in addition to filing the mandated report to Child Protective Services, have attempted to get the student to agree to attend counseling, however, she refuses to attend. The student commented:

> * My English teacher. I just feel close to her. She's always asking me if I'm O.K. Dr. Angelou, the assistant principal, I used to like her. But, I told her about a big problem. She told the school, I didn't like that. She betrayed me. I didn't know she'd tell.

Adult/School Setting

When asked to describe non-caring behaviors exhibited by adults in the school, the students engaged in various nonverbal behavior that indicated their stress or upset. Such behaviors included hugging their bodies, rhythmically rocking, rubbing their eyes, twirling their hair, or putting an arm on the chair or around the shoulder of the person who was speaking. A few students engaged in inappropriate laughter due to their lack of discomfort.

> * Mr. Godfrey, I hate him so much. He says he can't help you. I went to him the other day and cried and cried. He said nothing, didn't even give me a tissue. My friend was treated the same way. The school has the attitude of "why do I have to bother with them (us)?" It's easier that way for them. The security guards are caring and friendly, they say go to class, stay out of trouble.

A few students focused on teachers:

> * Teachers should act like they care. But they just want you in and out.

* Everybody should get together. Like the Alternative Education program. Because it's a small group the teachers have you deal with your problems in small group. Everybody is a friend. I really like it. Teachers have you make all the decisions.

* They should talk to you more and try to help you more.

* We should get equal attention but they make no effort. They focus on the good kids, they don't reach out. My math teacher treats me like dirt. I'm either embarrassed or ignored. I was told in front of the whole class that I failed my test. There should be more respect. Don't throw it in my face.

Regardless of the modality used to express themselves, students were sensitive to adult attitudes:

* People catch an attitude. The security guard, Delila, is always angry. I can't stand her. She's always talking about people, she's a phony.

* People who scream at me. It's their attitude, tone of voice. Their tone of voice says they are looking down at you.

All the students responded to what would make the school more like a family. The response is summarized below and they indicated that there was an absence of hope that it would happen:

* The school is so segregated. It bothers me. I want everyone to get along. It is impossible for it to happen. Everyone doesn't want to listen.

Race and ethnicity were considered of major importance to the at-risk students. " It's the real issue". Other students elaborated on how deep the cut goes:

* Black, White and Spanish don't mix much. Black don't mix much. Black don't mix at all. You only stay with non-Blacks if they are from when you were a little kid. The white kids in class say they can't do the work with these kids (us) in the class.

* There are lots of racial fights. Latin, African-American. The school is not really trying to make it come together. If anything they try to keep everyone separate. There is a lot of animosity and they do nothing about it.

Sadly, there were a few students who felt there was no one they either would or could turn to:

* Nobody. I don't trust nobody. I mostly leave it inside. I'm never going to change.

* Myself. I keep problems for myself or write in my journal. Myself is the one person I can trust. You never know who will turn on you.

Do the Persons Perceived as Caring Provide Supportive or Destructive Links to the School's Culture and Curriculum?

Sykes (1990) pointed out that a personality, rather than technique, skill, and knowledge, was more important in touching the lives of students. Students remembered the human qualities, "personality and style, passion and caring, even their eccentricities."

Supportive Links

Supportive adult links were described in the following ways:

* Teachers who care tell me not to go to the Alternative Education Program, that I am too bright. They tell me I can do a lot better. Some teachers really help you.

For one student, a one-on-one personal contact was very important:

* My counselor calls me down, checks in with me, takes me out to lunch. He says, "How are you doing, how's my daughter? He knows it's hell with my schoolwork.

For other students, a positive link meant the student's intelligence was acknowledged:

* They talk to you seriously. They don't yell, like some do. They reach you.

* They ask if I'm O.K., they conference with you. They say, "Is your homework done?" They let you know they really want you to pass.

When asked to describe an experience where students needed help or information about a school and to whom or where they went, one student responded:

> * I need help every day with my work. I ask people at home. There is an older lady, and sometimes I stay at her house. She helps me with my work.

This student developed a relationship with the woman while baby-sitting for the woman's child. The student said she goes to the woman every day for help. The woman serves as both a role model and a safe haven for the student. The student lives with her grandfather and mother. The mother spends most of her time on the street and the grandfather sexually abused the mother. In a roundabout way, the student intimated that she is able to fend off her grandfather by escaping to this woman's house. The student continued:

> * No one at school helps me. There are places to get help in school but I have no off periods to go there.

Time spent with friends, which is age appropriate, seemed to be preferred. Actives centered around going to each other's houses, talking on the phone, talking about their lives. Some spent time at the local teen center; others went to the local ice cream store and to the mall. Sports played a major role for some and represents both a skill they are good at and a way to pay for college.

Destructive Links

Those who are perceived as destructive links were described in terms of lacking maturity, creating fear in the student. There was a consensus of opinion regarding one female security guard being a destructive link:

> * There is one security guard, Delila. The things she says to you! Delila doesn't like (a female student). Delila should be more mature, but instead she wants to

fight (the student). Delila, her attitude is bad, she should know (the student) is a little girl. Delila has her own kids and she is 28-30, she shouldn't be like that.

An example of a teacher failing to be a supportive link was indicated in the following description.

* They tell me to come for extra help, and when I get there no one is there and they change the room around and don't tell you where it is.

* Teachers have a bad attitude, they say "I get paid if you pass or don't pass".

* They don't pay attention to me, so I don't pay attention to them. I can see through them.

* Racism! I was shocked when I moved here. The whites are favored, the Blacks and Hispanics are always wrong.

The guidance office as a caring place that provides positive links to the school for the at-risk student received mixed reviews. Only one of the counselors was seen as consistently helpful, approachable, and available to the students.

* Mr. Manilow is very helpful. He is looking for colleges where I can bring my daughter. He has helped me realize I can go far away to school even though I have a baby.
* I needed information about the Alternative Education program. Mr Manilow got me the application. He told me I had to wait until January. Working in the Alternative Education Program you do better, there are smaller classes. They pay attention to me individually. Not like here where there are about 120 kids in some classes.

Several students responded negatively.

* They are no help. It's the last place I'd go for anything. I hate going there.

When I asked them why they responded:

* Most of the Black students are told as freshmen that it's hopeless, helpless for college. That they should just hold on to staying in high school.

Others had a different reason for not going to the guidance office.

* Mainly because of Mr. Godfrey. The secretaries have an attitude. Mr. Godfrey is always in a power struggle. He needs everything his own way. He talks down to me and my parents. He is negative in general, talks down to all the parents. You won't believe what he said to my parents when they talked to him about putting me in the Alternative Education program. He said, "Well that is mostly for the minorities in this school".

There was a uniform answer to what one thing about the school the students would change to improve the school culture and strengthen the sense of caring. It was expressed in a variety of ways, but the message remained the same:

* More Black kids/teachers, more kids I can relate to.

* Get everybody together whether Spanish or Black. Do something that everyone participates in.

In relation to feeling a sense of membership in the school, we asked if the school is like a family. Students responded:

* No, it's little families--of kids

* Not to me, not a family but different levels of work areas, houses.

Peer pressure played an important part in male-female relationships that involved mixing cultures:

* It's not like a family because of the cafeteria. Spanish are in one door, Black in another door, White on the other side of the cafeteria. If you go out with a Black guy, Spanish Guys mind that. They talk about you if you do. If you are hanging out with a White person, they talk about you. They say you are turning White...a wannabe.

When we asked if there were celebrations or activities that attempted to bring the various cultures together, the answer was "no".

Who Keeps At-Risk Adolescents in School?

Female at-risk students at this high school are staying in school by various means of support that include role models, heroes, a significant teacher or counselor, being there for each other, and in some instances, self support.

Keeping an at-risk student in school sometimes requires skills in networking, exploring resources, and putting strategies in place that will impact the next generation.

> * I was pregnant eight months ago. I asked the nurse what to do. She suggested child development classes. Mr. Manilow enrolled me in the Teen Pregnancy Program at another school. We (the nurse and Mr. Manilow) and a person at the Teen Pregnancy Program discussed how to be a responsible mother, how having to raise a child is, protective sex, labor.

The questions pertaining to who students saw as successful or who was a hero to them yielded disturbing results. Several students responded:

> * I have no heroes, not even when I was little.

On the brighter side:

> * Bill Cosby, he's a Black person, he made it, rich, stayed together, no one put him down, he's very intelligent.
>
> * Older woman I know, she's a teacher, she went to school, supports herself, nobody to help.

Family/Home

Thirty years of research show that 90% of achievement in school is determined by school attendance, how much reading is done at home, and how much television a child watches. Studies also show that parental involvement is more important to academic success that the family's income level. Some of the barriers to involvement by parents at this school were described by Boger (1989).

> Parents who are underinvolved in their child's education do not lack interest. They have not been afforded the appropriate opportunities, encouragement and support. For many parents, there are several factors that present barriers to involvement in traditional home-school activities: school practices that do not accommodate the growing diversity of the families they serve, parent time and child care constraints; negative experience with schooling; lack of support for cultural diversity; and primacy of basic survival needs. (p 3)

There were a few responses that indicated the family system was a weak link in relation to the subject of spending time together. One student saw her father once a month and another student reported that the family was home at the same time but they did not really sit and talk.

* Dinner is the only time I spend with my family. Watching T.V. during dinner.

The family system was not always a support for keeping students in school. There was one basic response to what these students would tell families whose children are having difficulty in school and what advice they would give the families to help themselves and the student. The responses centered around asking why, being involved, knowing what is going on at school, and talking to the teachers and counselors as well as to the student.

* Work with the children. Don't let go. Have hope that they will do well. Help them, talk to them, talk to someone, if they are messing up. Don't say, "I'll forget about you". There is hope.

* Pay more attention, ask how is she doing once in a while. Spend more time with her.

* See what the problem is. Is something bothering her? Like me, my parents didn't even know I was doing bad. Ask are the kids trying to do what should be done.

One student heard her mother's words of wisdom as a positive influence on a sibling.

* My sister was having trouble, my mother did good for her. My mother helped her and said, "You have to learn, it's important or you won't get anywhere". You have to keep reminding the person. Homework, do your homework all the time.

A few students admitted that their parents exhibited a lack of interest in the success or failure of the child:

> * My mother is sick and tired of going through problems with my brother. It is up to us to make it. Whether we do or we don't.
>
> * My mother doesn't even care. When I show her that I got good grades she says, "Yeah, O.K.". If I come home and leave my bookbag on the floor and never move it, she doesn't say, "Did you do your homework?"
>
> * See what's wrong with school. Why doesn't the student like going? Fix the problem. No matter what, fix it. Parents need to find out about homework, but don't pressure too much. My mother nags me sometimes. Parents need to find out about why that specific class is the problem.

What may really be parental cultural and language barriers to helping students stay in school were perceived by some students as parents not caring:

> * If you want success, support them totally. My parents don't even know the school curriculum, they are Spanish. So I am by myself. I'm the mother and the father. Mine don't know what's going on. It's always been that way.

What Do the Adolescents Report Keeps Them In School?

Students reported coming to school for their favorite courses. Favorite courses ran the gamut, with art and math being the most popular. The criteria appeared to depend on the amount of self-expression students could achieve in the class, whether or not there was practical application, and if the subject matter came to them easily,providing them with a feeling of mastery or being smart.

For some students, school was a safe haven away from the psychological and physical harm of home. There were many hours spent with the following student before she shared that:

* I don't ell anyone my problems. I'll only tell you what I want you to know.

After several probes and a lengthy silence, she responded:

> * Ask for help. Try to get someone. Encourage them. Talk to them, ask how they are doing in school. There is no one in my house. I live with my grandfather. THERE IS NO ONE there to say, Lucinda, go to school! My grandfather is 74. No one says, go to school, I am on my own. Sometimes I think about moving in with a neighbor, but I don't know, I can't leave my grandfather by himself. But I need someone to take care of ME! Thinks are not working out. If it wasn't for (older woman), I wouldn't be in school.

One of the impediments to keeping students in school seems to be the revolving door detention/suspension policy of the school. Mann (1986) asserted that the most difficult of the high school's clientele would "serendipitously solve the institution's problem by disappearing". A student illustrated this in describing the school's suspension practices:

> * At (high school) you cut, you get suspended, you cut, you get suspended. Soon you get so far away from the work that you can't pass. Then you are 16 and you are dropped out. You're not doing nothing, you're failing, there's no point, you drop out.

When I asked students what they would like to add or suggest, the nature, enormity, and tension of the problems with which these students must cope, made it surprising that they bring their bodies to school and any learning is able to take place. They highlighted issues that work against the decision to stay in school, such as:

> * Suicide
>
> * My brother is in jail
>
> * How problems at home affect school work. I don't want to do nothing. I can see.
>
> * Whether or not to be in school. I get lazy and don't go. I need someone to attach to, someone my age, older, Black.

The 15 year old teen parent had this to offer:

> * Boys. I love my baby's father. We went through a lot of fighting. He hit me while I was pregnant. But we are still together. I was mean when I was pregnant. I hit him, I spit on him. He went to jail after the baby was born. He stole a car. He's out and things are much better now. Babies, sex, relationships.

The student consensus was that there should be more of what we were doing, meeting with students to discuss their feelings and opinions. One spokesperson said:

> * I like this group. It helps my feelings inside. I don't like to keep feelings inside, otherwise I blow up.

Summary

Research on successful secondary schools has cited common characteristics that include a quality of caring comprised of shared values, a sense of belonging, a sense of school membership, and academic engagement (Goodlad, 1984; Wehlage, 1989). Engagement requires intention, concentration, and commitment by students and staff. As with school membership, the degree of engagement is highly dependent upon the institution's contribution to the equation that produces learning. Engagement is a result of interaction between the students, teachers, and curriculum.

Institutional caring and authentic learning appeared to be dominant themes to the students. Students in the Alternative Education program seemed to be more secure in the feeling that teachers saw them as a person, made time for them, and in general, cared for them as people. At-risk students at this high school self-selected into the Alternative Education program in an attempt to have their needs met. The examination of the data revealed that teachers who were attentive, respectful, helpful and who listened to them,

students perceived to be caring and concerned about their social and academic welfare in the school environment.

Racism was a major theme for the Black, Latino, and Caucasian students. The students indicated through their responses that they felt bias by adults as well as by the various ethnic groups of students in the school. Female students did not seem to perceive distinctions or discrimination based on gender.

Achieving understanding and reaching constructive solutions requires putting aside the "if only" thinking: if only the kids were the way they used to be, if only families were intact, if only there were more money to hire counselors (Paterson, Purky, & Parker, 1986). Schools need to help at-risk students interpret the life they are living. Decisions must be made on how schools are going to teach students the competencies they want them to have, the roles the students can play in reconstructing their neighborhoods, and how the students can change their community. Parallel to this must be the reconstructing of the educational delivery system to meet the needs of all students.

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